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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1835  
RUEHBS/USMISSION USEU 0282  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 000119

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/19/2018

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: POLICE PREVENT DEMONSTRATION ON CENTRAL SQUARE

REF: A. MINSK 017

[1](#)B. MINSK 090

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On February 18, security forces prevented several dozen protestors from gathering on October Square in central Minsk, although a small group was allowed to protest elsewhere. Police took in eight persons, including Aleksandr Milinkevich, for several hours of questioning to prevent them from joining the demonstration. Restraint by the security services likely reflects a decision not to foul up attempts to achieve concessions from the West in return for the release of political prisoners. End summary.

Police Head of Off Latest Entrepreneurs' Protest

[1](#)2. (SBU) Police used overwhelming numbers to non-violently move about 50 protestors opposed to restrictions on small businesses from Minsk's October Square. Some protestors dispersed, but a group of approximately 15 proceeded under heavy police escort to walk away from October Square. They stopped for about 10 minutes at a major intersection and held up signs, before moving along to another intersection where they protested for half an hour.

[1](#)3. (C) Police picked up at least eight opposition activists, including Aleksandr Milinkevich, Olga Kozulina and Vyacheslav Sivchik on the way to the demonstration. Authorities released them all a couple hours after the demonstration disbanded. Allegedly police wanted to question them regarding a previous entrepreneurs' demonstration on January 10 (ref A). However, Kozulina told reporters no one asked her any questions. Sivchik pointed out to Acting DCM and Acting Pol/Econ Chief that he was in police custody January [1](#)10. Milinkevich told A/DCM his interrogators could not or would not tell him what alleged crime they were investigating or who the suspect was. Milinkevich added that police officials were almost apologetic toward him because they knew the questioning had nothing to do with law enforcement. Several entrepreneurs in the regions were prevented from coming to Minsk the day of protests either through arrests or house arrests.

[1](#)4. (C) Milinkevich noted that while riding in a police car to the station he could overhear orders radioed to officers policing the demonstration. He said the commands called for pushing protestors at least a kilometer from October Square, but to avoid provocation to violence and to perform their duties with a smile.

Comment: Dictatorship with a Kinder Face?

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15. (C) As predicted, splits between leaders of entrepreneurs and fading hopes for a quick compromise naturally drove down turnout (ref B). Quick action by security forces against the boldest demonstrators, combined with paddy wagons positioned on October Square, deterred other would-be protestors from expressing their opinions. The regime's decision to forgo violent tactics and to limit arrests most likely demonstrates a desire not to alienate the West and spoil any good will generated by the recent release of political prisoners.

STEWART